

Rights Not Rescue

A Report on Female, Trans, and Male Sex Workers' Human Rights in Botswana, Namibia, and South Africa

Executive Summary

**Sexual Health and Rights Project
Open Society Initiative for Southern Africa**



OPEN SOCIETY INSTITUTE

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Report by Anna-Louise Crago and Jayne Arnott

For copies of the full report contact Rebekah Chang, rchang@sorosny.org

Introduction

This report is a summary of the findings and recommendations of a situational assessment, carried out between May and June 2008 on the sexual health and rights of sex workers in Botswana, Namibia, and South Africa. The findings document widespread human rights abuses against sex workers as well as innovative organizing tactics amongst sex workers to redress these rights violations. The report highlights opportunities for nongovernmental organizations, governments, donors, and UN agencies to expand rights-based approaches to sex work that will ultimately improve the health and well-being of sex workers.

Sex work is presently illegal in these countries and the predominant attitude towards sex work is that it is immoral and exploitative of women. There is little to no dialogue or activities on legal and policy reform related to sex work. Most social interventions focus on rescuing and/or rehabilitating sex workers and preventing HIV transmission between sex workers and clients. Evidence-based approaches that protect and promote the rights of sex workers are extremely rare and the few that exist are under resourced.

The report is based on interviews and focus groups with 87 female, transgender, and male sex workers working on the street, on highways, at truck stops, in brothels, in agencies, near mines and in informal settlements across the region. Interviews were also conducted with 11 nongovernmental organizations in the region that work with sex workers. Qualitative methodologies were used to best access a rich data-set illustrating the complexities of the issues the report attempts to address. In this research, recurring themes that cross-cut the data indicate that certain phenomena are significant issues facing sex workers. As such, this report provides significant evidence for programmatic or policy interventions.

Human Rights Violations Against Female, Trans, and Male Sex Workers

Female, transgender, and male sex workers in Botswana, Namibia and South Africa face widespread and frequent human rights violations. These abuses occur at the hands of state actors including police, public health, and school officials, as well as from clients and the general public.

Violence by Police and the General Public

The criminalization of sex work in each of these countries leaves sex workers particularly vulnerable to sexual and physical abuse from law enforcement officers such as police and border guards. In all three countries, sex workers reported routine police violence including sexual violence, beatings, rubber bullets, and spraying sex workers' genitals with pepper-spray guns. Reports of recurring police violence emerged across all geographic sites of data collection, with the exception of Walvis Bay, Namibia. These acts were most often reported to occur in the context of police raids in brothels or on the street where sex workers were both lawfully or unlawfully arrested and sometimes, detained.

Every weekend, the police come. They kick the doors of our rooms in, wake us up and take us to the #4 police station. We try and hide on the roof if we hear them. Sometimes they shoot rubber bullets at us. The police usually beat us. Oh, and they like the spray gun. If we are working in the bar when they come, they switch off the jukebox, they say 'Sleep down, sleep down.' If you do not sleep down, they spray you. They hit. Then they take you. Never the customers, just us.

Babalwa, Johannesburg

The police come to your shack in the van. They take your money and sleep with you with no condoms. It is a rape because they force us. We are scared to report the rape because we are sex workers, so we are illegal.

Priscilla and Pinki, Rustenberg

In Botswana and South Africa, migrant sex workers, in particular from Zimbabwe, were often targeted with more severe violence from law enforcement officials. This was reflected in interviews by both migrant and local sex workers. Migrant sex workers from Zimbabwe also reported having experienced threats and sexual violence from border guards in Botswana. This was said to have occurred as they were being deported and handed over by police following a raid or as they tried to enter or re-enter the country. Male and trans women sex workers faced not only physical and sexual violence from police but also public taunting and humiliation for their sexual orientation or gender identity.

Repeated violence, extortion, and detention by law enforcement officers left sex workers feeling constantly under threat. They were often forced to see and be exposed to their attackers on a regular basis in the places where they earned a living. Such abuse severely compromises sex

workers' access to equal protection of the law and creates a climate of impunity that fosters further violence and discrimination against sex workers in the community-at-large.

The police come and find us on the street. They sexually harass us, they touch us, they force us to have sex. We consider it rape but we cannot go to the police because they say we are lying. We have no names because they take off their name tags when they do it. So they tell us to leave. My friend tried to report it and they pretended to open up a docket but nothing.

Zanele, Johannesburg

Every day, the police come and attack us. You have to give 50 pula to be free or they will take you to jail. But if you have no money when they catch you, they will abuse you. So, we try and hide by running and jumping into one of the trucks waiting at the weigh-station. Sometimes, though you have bad luck, and you fall on a trucker who takes advantage of you.

Rashida, Kasane

If someone harasses me, I cannot go to the police. They tell me it is my fault, that sex work is illegal.

Lovers, Kasane

The police will only help you if your passport is valid. If it isn't and someone harasses or rapes you, you just keep quiet. There is nothing you can do. They will arrest you, put you in jail and send you back.

Percer, Kazungulu

Sex workers often faced high levels of violence in general. In Windhoek, a number of women sex workers and trans sex workers had recently been killed along the highway where they worked. In Rustenberg, murders were also reported to occur with alarming frequency.

Since I have worked here in 2000, 15 to 20 sex workers have been killed. The police say they did investigations but found no information.

Valentine, Rustenberg

Anti-prostitution campaigns by vigilante groups, NGOs or faith-based groups or as part of government policy were signaled as contributing factors to stigma, scape-goating and violence against sex workers.

Unequal Access to Health Care & Social Services

HIV Prevention and Treatment

In the context of severe HIV epidemics in each of these countries, human rights violations and a lack of safe and supportive working conditions render sex workers particularly vulnerable to HIV and fuel transmission. Violence and discrimination against sex workers, police raids, and incarceration, and a lack of accessible and relevant information, evidence-based prevention tools, and treatment services compromise the ability of HIV-positive sex workers to protect their health and receive adequate care, treatment, and support. This was a theme that re-occurred in all sites that the data was collected.

I am HIV-positive, and at the hospital, they don't treat us like humans. They say loudly 'These ones they are selling themselves.' So now, the young sex workers won't go to the hospital because they are scared. Some women have chosen to die with no ARVs rather than go there, because if you are a sex worker and HIV+, you are in for it! They get angry at you if you are not using condoms, but we tell them: give us the skills to negotiate using a condom. We want these skills because we can see that like this we are dying slowly but surely.

Rashida, Kasane

If you don't pay the police, they take you to jail for some days and that is not the right place for a human being. There is no food or water or cigarettes. They don't allow you a shirt if it is cold, or a visitor. You can't take antiretroviral drugs or any medication you need.

Caroline, Johannesburg

Migrant sex workers who are HIV-positive are particularly excluded from access to treatment and care due to both xenophobia and lack of access to services restricted to nationals. Trans sex workers seeking trans-specific health care and gay male sex workers seeking non-judgmental health care are similarly neglected in most of the region.

Twenty-three of my friends died of AIDS. Nineteen trans women and 4 women, all sex workers. None of them got ARVs. It was the fear of discrimination and abuse from the doctors that kept them from getting medication. The fear of what might be said and done to them, because being trans is something everyone sees and the doctors say nasty things to us.

Midnight Monroe, Windhoek

Reproductive Health

In Botswana a number of sex workers reported the deaths of multiple colleagues due to unsafe abortions. Sex workers were particularly affected by a lack of access to comprehensive sexual and reproductive health services, particularly access to safe and legal abortion in Botswana and Namibia. This remains a pressing issue for women in general in countries in the region where

abortion is not legal or readily available and our data shows it had an important impact on female sex workers.

Discrimination

In addition to the discrimination sex workers face from police and health officials, sex workers also face discrimination in other spheres such as school, employment, and banks. In some cases, sex workers are excluded from the very communities in which they live and must either cope with constant harassment or keep to themselves.

In the townships, they yell and scream after you: “You’re going to sell!” We are excluded from the community. If there is a community meeting, we never get a letter.

Zanele, Johannesburg

The neighbours yell that we sell our bodies and taunt our children that their mothers sell sex. Sometimes, the neighbours fight us. We are too afraid it will get worse to report the case.

Priscilla, Rustenberg

Non-Enforcement of Labour Rights

The criminalization of sex work has also so far precluded the enforcement and protection of sex workers’ labor rights. The right to fair, just, and safe working conditions is inalienable regardless of legal status. This has been an important tenet in defending the labor rights of undocumented or “illegal” migrant workers and holds equally true for sex workers. The right to work and the right of all workers to benefit from “conditions that safeguard fundamental political and economic freedoms” are recognized in Article 6 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR).

In South Africa the Labour Relations Act defines an employee as including anybody who works for another person for remuneration. This Act gives effect to Section 23(1) of the Constitution that states that everyone has the right to fair labour practices. Nonetheless, the disregard for sex workers as workers, has left many of those working in brothels in South Africa and Namibia vulnerable to labour abuses such as withheld wages, arbitrary fines, restrictions on seeking medical assistance or assistance after violence, restrictions on mobility, confiscations of belongings including medication, and sexual harassment by management. Furthermore, it has left them without recourse or redress from labour boards or government bodies.

Sex Workers Demand Rights

Despite enormous challenges, sex workers in all three countries are organizing to protect their rights. In some cases such organizing has taken place formally, that is to say with the support of funders or registered and established NGOs, pursuing official channels for redress of violations. However, even where this has not taken place, in every locale included in this report, male, female and trans sex workers have been organizing informally; taking concerted individual and group action in support of their rights and for improved living and working conditions. Both forms of organizing are crucial and equally important. The widespread informal organizing sex workers so enthusiastically shared belie the image of sex workers as helpless victims. They are, rather, powerful agents of change. The organizing efforts documented in this report present important opportunities to support sex workers in achieving what they have chosen as their priorities for action.

Formal Organizing

In South Africa, sex workers have been fostering solidarity as part of Sisonke, a national network of sex workers supported by the Sex Worker Education and Advocacy Taskforce (SWEAT) in Cape Town. In Johannesburg, the Sisonke chapter has actively encouraged unity among sex workers in protesting unlawful arrests and police extortion. In Botswana, a sex worker testified in front of a parliamentary committee demanding recognition of sex workers' rights. The experience catalyzed sex workers in her community to begin meeting regularly to collectively defend their rights.

Partnerships between sex workers and supportive groups have also led to important steps in the fight for sex workers' rights. These alliances have been a powerful response to the stigma against sex workers and have allowed a combining of expertise that has been of great value in redressing violations.

In South Africa, SWEAT and the Women's Legal Centre have participated in cases of strategic litigation for sex workers' rights that have challenged the criminalization of sex work, unlawful arrest and detention of sex workers, and the exclusion of sex workers from protection under labour laws.

A partnership between Sisonke, SWEAT, and the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC) has also led to a campaign for the decriminalization of sex work and the recognition of sex workers' human and labour rights. SWEAT has documented abuse against sex workers and worked with Sisonke members to publicly campaign in the media against sexual and physical violence by police, backing up their claims with testimony from the ground.

Informal Organizing

Resisting Violence and Discrimination

Sex workers organized against violence by sharing information on aggressors, by accompanying and supporting each other following an attack, by using the media to denounce police rape and extortion and by fighting back together against tsotsis¹ if they attacked any sex worker.

Sex workers mobilized against not only discrimination but, at times, against the wholesale community exclusion they faced for being sex workers or for being trans and gay. In Namibia, older trans sex workers opened their homes to younger trans and female sex workers with nowhere to go, offering them acceptance, support, and safety tips as well as organizing community suppers and pageants.

Improving Working Conditions

All sex workers interviewed organized either individually or collectively to improve their working conditions, and in so-doing, protect not only their livelihood but also, their health and human rights.

Sex workers on the street in Johannesburg, made arrangements with underground parking guards to use their spare rooms for sexual transactions, their small payments bought them security and safer work locations.

Zimbabwean sex workers in Botswana protected their earnings by trading sex for petrol, large crates of foodstuffs or appliances that held or increased their value when brought home to Zimbabwe.

In the Hillbrow district of Johannesburg, brothel and street sex workers actively enforced unity on condom use for all transactions. In one brothel over 100 sex workers agreed to unite to raise their prices. In so doing, they lowered the number of clients they needed to make sufficient income and reduced the attraction of having unprotected sex due to inadequate earnings.

We came together and came up with a plan to raise the price for sex. We talked to Caroline, the local Sisonke president, she set up a meeting during the day at the bar. That bar is big, there were like 100 girls—the whole building was there! We decided we would all charge 50 Rand a client. We let the manager know and it mostly worked.

Babalwa, Johannesburg

Sex workers often pooled their resources: They shared condoms if a colleague was without. In Windhoek, where police routinely confiscated or destroyed sex workers' condoms, one trans woman sex worker hid condoms for all the other sex workers in her high boots. They also shared information: explicit and relevant sex tips and safer sex tips, information on clients, and health information on taboo topics such as abortion or hormone therapy for trans sex workers. In

¹ gangsters

addition to resources and information, these networks and collaborative actions provide solidarity for a community often under attack.

In South Africa, many sex workers participated in rotating joint saving schemes called “stockvels.” These enabled them to save money despite discrimination in opening bank accounts. It also safeguarded against the routine police theft of all their savings. The financial security allowed sex workers to support themselves and each other in times of illness, injury, or unexpected loss of income as well as helping to support their enforcement of safer sex.

We are building our houses, paying for our own school fees and those of our children. Stockvel makes you feel secure. It could help a lot of girls to use condoms. Or if you are sick, stockvel will give you money.
Zanele, Johannesburg

Protecting Health

Sex workers had multiple strategies to protect their health, as well as that of their intimate partners and clients. Sex workers across many sites reported that they routinely encouraged each other to test for HIV and to adhere to treatment. In Johannesburg, sex workers shared medication with others whose belongings were confiscated for not paying the daily rent in one of the brothels. They also routinely encouraged each other to have safer sex with intimate partners.

Improving Living Conditions

Sex workers also organized to improve their living conditions and for the respect of their individual and collective dignity. Sex workers often shared childcare duties during work hours. In many sites in South Africa and Botswana, when a sex worker was gravely ill, money was often pooled to care for her or to send her home for care. When a sex worker died, other sex workers tried to identify her and pool money to send her back to her family for burial. If a Zimbabwean sex worker working in one of the brothels in Hillbrow was in desperate need of assistance, word would go out to the other brothels in the area and the Zimbabwean sex workers in all the establishments would contribute to help.

In Windhoek, amongst sex workers who struggled to eke out a living wage, the first sex worker to earn money for the day bought food for all other sex workers. A number of women and trans youth involved in the sex trade contributed a part of their earnings to pay for the school fees of one youth in the group they thought had the most promise to finish school.

Sex workers in Botswana, Namibia, and South Africa reported having cared for many fellow sex workers, a number of whom were also close friends or lovers, as they died of AIDS. In some cases, this was one or two people, in other cases, it was upwards of twenty.

In Namibia, some sex workers continued to offer support and care to the orphaned children of sex workers who had passed on. One trans sex worker in Namibia honored the memories of those who had died of AIDS by keeping a list of their names and details about who they were, which could be shared for collective mourning.

Advancing Sex Workers' Rights: The Need to Move Beyond "Rehabilitation"

The HIV epidemics in Botswana, Namibia, and South Africa constitute grave crises. Estimated adult HIV prevalence rates are 23.9 percent in Botswana, 15.3 percent in Namibia, and 18.1 percent in South Africa.² In many cases these epidemics are at their worst levels in the townships or locations where many sex workers live and work.³ Due to human rights violations and poor working conditions, sex workers remain disproportionately affected by HIV: often with higher HIV prevalence than the general community⁴ and lesser access to health care and treatment.

It is no exaggeration to say that sex workers are facing a health and human rights crisis in Southern Africa. Despite this fact, very little is being done to protect sex workers' rights, and even less, to promote these rights. Instead, a significant proportion of funding is going towards initiatives such as "rehabilitation" that have not been proven to work: there is no evidence that they lower the numbers of people in sex work or reduce HIV.⁵ As a result, sex workers are seeing their access to evidence-based HIV-programming severely compromised. This is a major infringement of sex workers' human rights to life, health, information, and non-discrimination.

Indeed, the two most common types of projects targeting sex workers in the region are HIV interventions and rehabilitation interventions geared towards assisting women, and sometimes trans women, to stop doing sex work. Most of the groups we visited offered a combination of these two types of services. Health interventions are mostly funded from HIV budgets and include condom distribution and encouragement to test. Rehabilitation programs generally involve skills training courses (generally in tailoring, cooking, gardening, candle-stick making, computer literacy, and HIV counseling) but can also include Christian doctrine or social lessons and are generally funded from gender budgets, and increasingly from HIV budgets too.

Little or no funding is available for projects sex workers are demanding such as interventions that would address law reform, reduce violence and discrimination, and create safe working environments that support their ability to enforce condom use. As a result, the funding for work on violence against women, for example, did not address violence and harassment by the police, but was instead channeled towards "rehabilitation" of sex workers through skills-training.

Some sex workers do desire further skills or access to further mainstream educational opportunities without the barriers caused by discrimination or school fees. They were quite clear,

² UNAIDS, 2008 Report on the Global Aids Epidemic

³ For example, HIV prevalence rates in townships near Durban are estimated to be over 30 percent (Shisana et al. 2005) and in Hillbrow to be approximately 30 percent amongst clients at antenatal clinics (Department of Health. National HIV and syphilis sero-prevalence survey of women attending public antenatal clinics in South Africa, 2001)

⁴ In Hillbrow, the HIV prevalence rate among sex workers is 60 percent (see Delany S. Summary of behavioural and epidemiological data from Hillbrow sex worker intervention. Reproductive Health Research Unit, 2001). In one study in the Katutura location, in Windhoek, Namibia 73 percent of sex workers interviewed were HIV-positive (Hjorth, 2005)

⁵ Greenall, Mathew. Survey of evidence-base of three pillars of the UNAIDS Guidance Note on HIV and Sex Work, 2007. <http://www.nswp.org/safety/unaid-response/>

however, that conditionality on leaving sex work was not only discriminatory but in the case of the most common types of skills-training offered, it was also untenable.

They make us feel guilty. They want us to say that we want to change. But even if we want to do these projects, we don't see ourselves quitting sex work. No, it is our baby that one, it is not going anywhere. They may want us to stop but don't cross that line with us.

Rashida, Kasane

Across all different sites, none of the sex workers who reported having completed rehabilitation programs had managed to achieve gainful employment from their training, and they cited only one or two participants who had. This was often exacerbated by discrimination from employers and the community against current or former sex workers. Sex workers repeatedly reported that of the sex workers who had stopped doing sex work, this was most often attributable to having found a financially supporting partner, having simply switched (sometimes back) to other jobs, or in a few cases, having used their earnings from sex work for a formal education or investment in a business.

The rehabilitation projects were not reported by sex workers to have had any impact on reducing violence against sex workers or improving working conditions—except in one regard. Sex workers in one city in Botswana reported that projects such as a “rehabilitation-oriented” gardening project had allowed them a chance to talk together in a group and share strategies for problems with particular customers and police. This outcome stands in ironic contrast to the purported outcomes of rehabilitation projects and supports what sex workers reported in all three countries—that none of the rehabilitation projects had had a noticeable impact on the number of women or trans women doing sex work.

Certain rehabilitation projects furthered stigma and discrimination against sex workers by presenting sex work as an unfit and unacceptable practice and by pressuring participants to tell those who were still doing sex work not to. In at least one group that offered both “rehabilitation services” and HIV prevention and condoms, this created a significant tension. Sex workers who wanted to win the approval of staff or benefit from skills-training sometimes lied about no longer doing sex work. Such a dynamic has the potential to severely compromise sex workers’ access to adequate information and support around HIV and violence. It may also arise more frequently in the future as HIV groups targeting sex workers are encouraged to fund rehabilitation projects *as* HIV interventions.

The power of conservative political and religious lobbies domestically, national laws criminalizing sex work and homosexuality, and right-wing funding restrictions on foreign aid have fueled the move away from evidence-based HIV interventions. One such measure has been the requirement by USAID that grantees sign an “anti-prostitution pledge,” an oath not to promote prostitution or the legalization of prostitution, in order to receive funds from the President’s Emergency Plan For Aids Relief (PEPFAR). In other parts of the world, grantees have come under attack for “promoting prostitution” by supporting sex workers who remain in sex work. This has put a certain amount of pressure on grantees to prove they are not contravening the pledge by, for example, offering “rehabilitation” programming as part of their HIV programming.

At least two of the nongovernmental organizations encountered that engaged in HIV-related work had signed the required “anti-prostitution pledge” in order to receive USAID funds. Two other organizations said they were willing to sign the pledge to receive support from USAID because they were running out of funds. Restrictions such as the “anti-prostitution pledge” risk making it very difficult for groups receiving HIV funds to support sex-worker led initiatives or to move towards making advocacy for sex workers’ rights and law reform, a core priority.

Recommendations to Protect Sex Worker Rights

1. Decriminalize Sex Work

Recognize and address the relationship between laws criminalizing sex work and the human rights violations consequent to these laws and policies. Law reform will constitute a first step in reducing the high levels of violence against sex workers and create the conditions where sex workers are not policed, and can more freely access protections, recourse, and services from the state.

2. Oppose Policies Implemented through Police Raids against Sex Workers

Governments, UNAIDS and other UN bodies should explicitly oppose HIV or sex work policies that are implemented through police raids or that give police more power to extort sex workers or to use physical or sexual violence against sex workers.

3. Recognize and Advocate on the Link between Human Rights Abuses against Male, Female, and Trans Sex Workers and HIV Transmission

Human rights violations and poor working conditions fuel sex workers' vulnerability to HIV. It is imperative to address these fundamental underlying causes in order to fight HIV.

4. Invest in Evidence-Based and Rights-Based Health Initiatives for Sex Workers

Governments should invest resources and engage in partnerships with relevant civil society groups in partnership with sex workers to develop evidence-based and rights-based health interventions. This investment is in line with commitments identified in National AIDS Plans across the region

5. Support Sex-Worker Led Anti-Discrimination Trainings

Government ministries, particularly Health and Justice should allocate resources and engage with rights-based organizations towards developing anti-discrimination training materials. These materials and programs can address the knowledge gaps, address stigma and discrimination, and promote the rights of sex workers.

6. Fund and Support Sex Workers' Collective Organizing and Organizations that Promote Sex Workers' Rights and Health

In many parts of the world, sex worker-led or rights-based projects have shown that they are the best-suited and best-equipped to fight HIV and improve rights. Their successes are documented in both the public health and human rights literature. They offer a powerful example of how funding and institutional partnerships in support of sex worker organizing can achieve tremendous results.

7. Support Mainstream Human Rights Groups and Other NGOs to Collaborate with Sex Worker Groups and Projects to Document and Confront Violence by State and Non-state Actors

Routine human rights violations against sex workers have been allowed to continue in a climate of almost total impunity. It behooves the international human rights and social justice communities to ally with sex workers and sex worker groups to assist in documenting and advocating around these violations such that they can be redressed.

8. Support Health and Rights Initiatives Dealing with the Specific Realities Faced by Migrant Sex Workers and of Male and Trans Sex Workers

Migrant sex workers face major obstacles, and at times, complete exclusion from accessing sustained and comprehensive health care and treatment. This is both a systemic exclusion and linked to racism and stigma against migrants and must be redressed. Male sex workers often face homophobia and stigma in attempting to access appropriate health services. Trans sex workers lack access to respectful and adequate medical care, particularly for those trans women who are undergoing physical transitioning.

9. Support Mechanisms for Redress of Human Rights Violations

Disseminate information and facilitate access to official mechanisms and processes whereby sex workers can challenge human rights violations. These include access to patient and victim charters, official complaints procedures in response to mistreatment by health and police personnel, legal aid, and mediation and arbitration over labor issues.

Excerpt from Interview with Caroline Zulu, Johannesburg

Can you tell me what are you most excited about right now?

We prayed and asked, and we are finally getting an office space and a computer for the Johannesburg chapter of Sisonke, the South African Sex Workers Network.

What are some of the issues sex workers are facing in Hillbrow?

The police abuse sex workers, steal our money, demand sex. When the girls are arrested, the police want us to pay 300 Rand to let us free. They say it is a fine for “loitering.” But they refuse to give us an official receipt for our money or a paper that says we were arrested for “loitering.” Once we pay, there is no record of the charges, so we can’t go to court.

So, we are talking with each other, with all the sex workers, and saying don’t pay the police, let them take you to the jail and demand a paper receipt of the loitering charge. We are collecting these papers and SWEAT will help us do an action around it.

It is a long process but it is necessary because it is getting worse with the police: they are always demanding sex from us or taking advantage of us. Sometimes, they take sex workers in their cars and drop them very far off outside town with no money and they must struggle to come home.

Both girls in the brothels and on the street are excited for it to change. On the street, they all tell one lady the info of what is happening and she tells me. These days, many Zimbabwean girls on the street and indoors are all complaining about cops, cops, cops...

Are the police different with the girls on the street and in the brothels?

In the brothels, the police run in and run upstairs to where the girls live. Sometimes, they even shoot rubber bullets, they are too rough! They steal and steal. They know sex workers cannot have bank accounts because you need a pay slip to open one, so they go through our things and steal all our money, all our savings. Then they arrest sex workers for loitering... But they pay rent to live in those rooms! Now tell me what kind of loitering is that!

When they load the girls in the police van, instead of counting them 1, 2, 3, 4, they count the sex workers by how much money they will take from us, 300, 600, 900, 1200.

And if you don’t pay they take you to jail for some days and that is not the right place for a human being. You can’t take antiretroviral drugs or any medication you need. There is no food or water or cigarettes. They don’t allow you a shirt if it is cold, or a visitor. But if you pay, you don’t have to go there. And most pay.

On the street, when girls pick up customers they sometimes go with him, but it isn’t safe, so it is preferable to go to a near-by hotel. But since sometimes there is no money for that, girls have made deals with security guards who work in underground parking lots. They pay 20 Rand for a pedestrian customer, more for a car. And then they can have sex in the car, or sometimes there are little rooms down there where you can lie down a blanket or something for a bed. It can be crowded down there, maybe you will find another sex worker is already in the room, but it is safer because you have got security and it is safer then going somewhere you don’t know.

Now, the police have caught on that the girls go there though. Last month, the cops went into the parking lot as usual looking for sex workers. But the sex workers were tired of how the cops come and rape them. So, they locked one of the police officers up in a little room. Then they ran and called the Daily Sun newspaper and told them. The police officer had broken down

the door by the time the media arrived but they managed to get pictures of him running away!

You see, sex workers do want to fight the system but it is hard sometimes when you do not know where to start.

Do you work in the streets or brothels?

I worked a couple months in the streets, now I work in the brothels or hotels or I take clients back to my flat. I didn't like the street, I never felt safe. There weren't places like those underground parking lots then. You could go to a man's place and there would be 4 or 5 guys waiting to rape you. Also, I hated the cops and I hated having to run, run, run from them everyday.

In the brothels, it is safer because you have security men. But sometimes you still have to run, when the cops come, sometimes you try and escape to the roof. And let me tell when you run up nine floors, you cough a lot when you get to the top. And you are there shaking. Scared.

What are you proudest of right now?

We are learning different skills like computers, sewing, catering and counseling skills. That makes me happy, when people see us as capable people, as human beings. It is not only education that will take you far: with your hands and mind, you can do many things.

Also, you know, we sex workers are supporting our children and sometimes supporting whole large families, 10 or 15 people. We are paying for our children's school, sometimes up to college. There are lots of challenges facing sex workers. But you know: we are not so different from women who visit their boyfriends and get money. Or our mothers and sisters who wash and cook and take care of their boyfriend or husband waiting to be paid or supported. It is the same thing, why criticize us?